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# Forestry in the midwest: *an endangered species*

Why should our forest lands be saved? The general stability in preserving forest lands by the family landowner is being threatened by property ownership turnover. A general awareness of the problem needs to be transferred from the professional field to the general public. This can be accomplished through public awareness and by educational programs in our school systems. It is a job for each of us in which urgency is critical.

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by Dr. Gerald Schnepf  
Background

**W**HY should forest or "natural" lands be saved for the future? What is the case for and why the interest in "saving" these forest and scenic areas? What motivation is there by society not to consume remaining natural lands and by the individual not to convert them to more "productive" uses? Motivational factors for society and the individual to varying motivational levels is also not necessarily the same. Society tends to move sluggishly with trends in social concern. Ten years ago the move was for environmental issues; today it is for economic stability; tomorrow? In other words, society's tendency is to respond to crisis situations (often rather late) rather than to develop a disciplined and long range perspective. Conversely the individual's ability to respond is quicker and tends to remain relatively stable over time even though there may be some fluctuation as economic conditions change.

It is the general stability shown by the individual property owner that to date has been largely responsible for the forest land remaining in the Midwest. A prime example of stability is the large number of "Century Farms" or properties in Iowa that have been held by the same family for long periods of time. This family landowner has become emotionally attached to the property and as a consequence tends to be less motivated by economic pressures to convert the forest or natural lands into crop or pasture ground. On the other hand, the purchaser or new owner of a tract of land is generally motivated by economic factors expressed either by productivity of the land or as an investment in anticipation of increased value (through development or its inherent agricultural productivity).

With this concept in mind, it is

understandable why the forest lands are disappearing. As the long term property holder feels the pressure and need to shift from the rural setting to an urban life, property ownership turnover increases to a new less emotional owner who is almost totally motivated by short term economic factors. This shift from rural to urban has been the most dramatic in the past 20 years. It is during this same period that we have had the most dramatic property turn-over and accelerated rates of forest loss (estimated to be between 20,000-40,000 acres per year).

The reason or desire for the "saving" of forest land by the new property owner is almost totally absent as a factor in their decision over the development or management of the property. The lack of any major clear and decisive forestry and/or land use efforts in the Midwest is a clear indication that society and most individuals are not aware of or do not feel that the remaining forest lands "must be saved". We are in a consumer-oriented period. As a consequence, there is a clear lack of motivation by society or the individual to conserve forest land. This particular attitude, however, is not exclusive to protection of forest lands; it is pervasive through all resource fields from soil conservation to water management. There is little long term economic or social motivation to manage lands and waters with a stewardship ethic that will assure their presence and/or economic opportunities "for those who follow".

## Motivational Strategy

We must reverse our thinking and go back to the basic issue to objectively determine the "why". Why should our forest lands be saved?

### 1. Define the Problem

In order to answer that basic question, we as foresters must call on the

full range of professionals: landscape architects, engineers, soil conservationists, economists, etc. Based upon the input from other professionals and from the general public, we need to answer that question clearly for both society and the individual in society. The answer to "why?" must address both short term and long term considerations. With this task completed, we will have taken the first step.

### 2. Awareness and Education

This clear *definition or statement of the problem* must then be transferred from the professional field to the general public. This has to be done in two manners; first by *public awareness* efforts to adults in our society to obtain immediate response and concurrently by *educational programs* in our school systems for the long range impact to our future landowners and managers. A portion of our educational and awareness efforts must be devoted to developing an understanding of land rights. New concepts of land rights and stewardship should be explored and a longer range perspective encouraged for the management of property. We must start the slow process of removing from the "bundle of land rights" the right to destroy the land and resources.

The awareness and education efforts must not be oversimplified. Although initial public awareness and educational efforts may emphasize various elements, there must be a clear predetermined program for ultimately bringing these elements together for the public. Management of our environmental and natural resources is not simply a question of "saving our forest land". It is a complex and interrelated question as Aldo Leopold, an Iowa born naturalist amply stated:

*"Conservation is a state of harmony between men and the land. By land is meant all of the things, on,*

*over or in the earth. Harmony with land is like harmony with a friend; you cannot cherish his right hand and chop off his left . . . you cannot love game and hate the predator. You cannot conserve the waters and waste the ranges. You cannot build the forest and mine the farm. The land is one organism. The competitions are as much a part of the inner workings as the cooperations. You can regulate them . . . cautiously . . . but you cannot abolish them."*

Almost without fail our past oversimplification of a complex problem has often resulted in dealing with one element of the problem at the sacrifice of other elements—imbalance! Our efforts at forest management and conservation in the Midwest must be related to soil conservation, agricultural production, wildlife management, water management, and economic development—balance!

We need to recognize along with other professions that our particular discipline of forestry is only one factor in a package of factors. In many instances each discipline becomes only a small factor in the midst of a wide range of factors which come together to form the complex system of resource management or mismanagement.

The educational and awareness efforts developed must portray this complexity and interrelationship in order to obtain credibility and responsiveness by the individual and by society. We should never attempt to undersell an issue to the public. Short term thinking needs to be altered so today's decisions are considered not only in terms of today's economic gain but of tomorrow's economic needs.

An example of a public awareness approach is the public service announcement on page 35 (one of several developed by the Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation) prepared for distribution to the printed media throughout Iowa. Public service announcements are only one element of a much broader public awareness and educational program developed by the Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation. Other elements include: visual public service announcements, conservation education curriculum, publication of a book entitled *Iowa's Natural Heritage*, informational dinners, brochures, and a film "For Those Who Follow".

#### **Conservation Options**

With the problem clearly stated

and awareness and educational efforts in motion, our attention can be devoted to the development of optional methods of motivating the property holder to "save the forest land". What we will really be doing, if successful, is to motivate land holders to become stewards of their land and resources. Basic to this aspect is the need to shift our development of options from a single issue approach to a broad resource management concern and from a short term economic perspective to the long term economic consequences of continued mismanagement.

It is important that there be many "tools" to work with to meet the particular needs of society, landowners, and the resources. Traditional approaches such as easements, covenants, tax incentives (positive and negative), cost-share programs, zoning, land trusts and leases, and non-traditional approaches—transfer of development rights, land acquisition and resale with some of the rights altered, and product consumer's financing of conservation—need to be explored with greater vigor and with a positive attitude toward their utilization.

#### **Summary**

A clear definition of the problem, initiation of awareness and educational efforts, and the active pursuit of both traditional and non-traditional conservation options are the basic ingredients for reversing current trends in loss of forest land.

Two areas of caution—(1) There is a tendency to depend solely upon

government. It is not the job of government alone. It is the job of each one of us. The largest percentage of lands in the Midwest are privately held; therefore, the need for a shared responsibility with the private sector. A partnership with government must be encouraged. This takes a concentrated effort by both parties. However, the private sector appears ready to accept the challenge. Government must also respond in a positive manner.

(2) We must not be afraid to step forward to try new approaches. The aspect of failure must not be feared but utilized as a way of improving on the next approach developed.

Government and the private sector must work towards defining its long range goals for natural resources including forest areas. How many acres of woodland are enough? What do we want this state to look like in the year 2050? If goals are once defined, specific programs can then be developed and maintained to attain these goals. These goals must be dynamic. These goals should guide the agencies or Administrative branch of government. They should also serve to guide the Legislative branch of government, the public and the private sector.

Urgency is critical. If we hesitate or procrastinate over any of the outlined steps, the question of "saving our forests" becomes academic. Forestry in the Midwest is indeed an endangered species. Unless we react with a fervor and haste symbolic of major disasters, the "species" may quickly approach extinction. ■

**Gerald F. Schnepf** was born and raised on a farm in Lyon County, Iowa. He obtained his B.S. from Iowa State University in Forestry and Range Management. He obtained his M.S. from the University of Minnesota in Resource Economics. Gerald has been the Chief Outdoor Recreation planner for Province of Manitoba, Chief planner for the Iowa Conservation Commission and is now the Executive Director of the Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation. Gerald resides on an acreage near Bondurant with his wife and two children.

## **Forests in Iowa**

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they keep ever before the minds of our people the necessity and value of trees. Men who have labored hard to eradicate every native oak, hickory, walnut and maple from their premises have afterwards gone to the trouble to set out about their houses soft maples and box-elders! The people mean well, but they are deplorably in need of sound information. It must be said also that there is among in-

telligent citizens a growing interest in our problem. Men are discussing woodland reservations, rural parks, water-courses and problems of water supply as never before, and there is no doubt that if this interest can be maintained the next decade will show great improvement in public sentiment in Iowa in all that pertains to forest maintenance and preservation. ■